
From: Cole, Samantha [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=49A7B2FA4F2E49DC89409A50359461AB-SCOLE4]
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By Don Carrington

The Atlantic Coast Pipeline cuts a 600-mile underground swath through three states, beginning in Harrison County, West Virginia. It branches out to Chesapeake, Virginia, and also continues south near Roanoke Rapids and heads to Pembroke — traversing counties such as Nash and Cumberland before settling in Robeson.

The route keeps company with Interstate 95, running alongside the major thoroughfare through down-on-their-luck towns once rich in tobacco and textiles. Towns now looking for a fresh breath, a new way.

On each side of the pipeline stand groups of people for and against the project, each side knowing it's right and sure its adversary is misguided and foolhardy.

Proponents say the pipeline will bring jobs and a renewed economic vitality. That new, fresh life.

Tony Copeland, the N.C. secretary of Commerce who serves under a Democratic governor, said as much during a speech for the N.C. FreeEnterprise Foundation in December.

Opponents say otherwise.

They denounce the process of fracking, from which the natural gas will emanate. They cite a harmful addiction to fossil fuels, an irreparable harm to waterways and forests. To poor communities, including those with large minority populations.

For one perspective, listen to Johnston County businessman Durwood Stevenson, a Democrat and former N.C. Board of Transportation member. He wants Gov. Roy Cooper, the aforementioned Democrat, to expedite construction.

"The Atlantic Coast Pipeline is an opportunity of a lifetime to provide clean efficient energy for the future of Eastern North Carolina and I am asking Governor Cooper to join me in supporting the Atlantic Coast Pipeline," Stephenson says in radio and television ads supporting the project.

"I did the ads to promote economic development in Eastern North Carolina. The pipeline is another tool for us," he told Carolina Journal.

For another perspective, NC WARN Executive Director Jim Warren and outgoing North Carolina NAACP President the Rev. William Barber want the project dead. WARN is a nonprofit with the stated mission of "watch-dogging Duke Energy" and "building people power for a swift North Carolina transition to clean, renewable and affordable power generation."

A report distributed by the NAACP calls the pipeline a health risk to "communities of color."

Cooper, putting aside for a minute Copeland's cheerleading, has said little about the pipeline. Any opinion he offers would be met at the same time with scorn and praise.

In June, Warren and Barber held a news conference calling on Cooper to phase out the import and use of fracked gas in North Carolina. They asked Cooper to cast a similar fate upon all natural gas fuel electricity generators in North Carolina.

Replace them with renewable sources, they say.

Warren told CJ in December he and Barber were “doing those things in order to slow the climate crisis. Natural gas is almost entirely methane and the amount venting and leaking from routine U.S. natural gas operations makes gas even worse than coal in terms of climate change.”

Yet the pipeline project creeps along, like I-95 on Labor Day weekend.

“We have acquired about 80 percent of the right-of-way for the project and expect to start construction in early 2018,” ACP spokesman Aaron Ruby told CJ in December.

The ACP is a partnership among Richmond, Virginia-based Dominion Energy, Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas, and Southern Company Gas. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission approved the pipeline in October, but the N. C. Department of Environmental Quality, an agency that falls under Cooper, is still reviewing water quality plans and other issues associated with the project.

CJ has failed to find any report or document signaling the governor’s position on the project, and his press office failed to respond to multiple requests from CJ seeking his position. Cooper generally receives strong support from environmental advocates.

Lt. Gov. Dan Forest, a Republican who may challenge Cooper for governor in 2020, is a vocal supporter of the ACP.

“The proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline is a huge opportunity for Eastern North Carolina. We just can’t unleash the economic potential that has eluded the eastern part of our state without this pipeline,” Forest said in a video message produced by his office.

Project details

The pipeline would run 186 miles through North Carolina and would intersect with I-95 five times.

The additional gas will supplement existing gas resources and fuel new electricity generation plants. ACP claims the project will generate \$377 million a year in energy cost savings, \$28 million in new local tax revenue, create 17,240 construction jobs, and 2,200 new jobs in other industries.

The pipe to be used will be 42 inches in diameter in West Virginia and Virginia; 36 inches in North Carolina. It will be buried three to five feet below ground in most places, including riverbeds and streambeds. The right-of-way will be up to 75 feet wide.

ACP will compensate property owners for granting easements so the company can install, operate, and maintain the pipeline. As a public utility, ACP has eminent domain rights. If property owners refuse to grant an easement or can’t agree on compensation the matter will go to court, ACP will obtain authorization to proceed, and the court will set the compensation.

Opponents have lined up with hopes of swaying Cooper’s decision.

Some organizations, including the Sierra Club, have appealed directly to Cooper.

The News & Observer editorial board in November expressed the paper’s objections: The “overarching reason to oppose a new pipeline that would carry 1.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas a day is that it takes North Carolina’s energy development in exactly the wrong direction.”

A recent report titled “Fumes Across the Fence-Line,” co-sponsored by the national NAACP, claims oil and gas facilities, including pipelines like the ACP, harm African-American communities.

“The life-threatening burdens placed on communities of color near oil and gas facilities are the result of systemic oppression perpetuated by the traditional energy industry, which exposes communities to health, economic, and social hazards,” the report says.

The report notes that seven of the eight counties along the proposed route have poverty levels higher than the state average of 17.2 percent. “The expansion of the ACP and other natural gas infrastructure along the North Carolinian coast would have unavoidable adverse impacts on already vulnerable communities.”

Not so, say proponents.

In November, The Robesonian editorial staff called on Cooper to support the ACP, which terminates in Robeson County.

“Gov. Roy Cooper’s role should favor the rural and impoverished communities, to include Robeson County, whose collective fingers are crossed in the hope that the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, arguably the most scrutinized project of its kind in this nation’s history, will clear what is essentially a final hurdle of getting a water quality permit from the Department of Environmental Quality.”

Lumberton is the county seat of Robeson County, the proverbial end of the pipeline.

In a guest column for the Robesonian, Lumberton Chamber of Commerce Chairman Al Locklear urged his community’s support.

“The natural gas transported through the pipeline will be used to generate cleaner electricity for residents all across eastern North Carolina, and perhaps more important, to fuel new industrial development in our area.”

Robeson County, says the state Commerce department, is designated a Tier 1 county, placing it among North Carolina’s 40 most distressed counties. The median household income, as of 2015, was about \$32,000.

The two sides face off

Against the pipeline

The Sierra Club. “Dear Governor Cooper: The Sierra Club appreciates your long history of support for a clean environment, and for reducing the harmful effects of fossil fuel on the climate and public health. On behalf of more than 65,000 Sierra Club members and supporters in North Carolina, we urge you to not support the proposed Atlantic Coast Pipeline.” wrote Sierra Club representative Deb Self in a letter to Cooper in April.

Appalachian Voices is against mountaintop coal mining and fracked-gas pipeline building, and for solar and wind generated energy. “We need your help to send a message to Gov. Roy Cooper and officials in Raleigh that North Carolina doesn’t want or need this pipeline. Help us flood the governor’s office with holiday-themed “NO ACP” postcards. You can download and print at home, or we can send one on your behalf.”

Amy Adams, a program manager with Appalachian Voices a former regional office supervisor for the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources: “In Gov. Cooper’s first year in office, his administration faces decisions that will determine its environmental legacy. Will it be duped by these corporate charlatans or strand strong against them?”

The Southern Environmental Law Center. “This unnecessary pipeline will not only harm the mountains, forests and waterways in its path – it will also disrupt the lives of the people living and working along its 600-mile-long route and lock a new generation into decades more of fossil fuel consumption,” says the SELC. The SELC said in December that utility customers in North Carolina do not need the ACP because there is a drastic reduction in the forecast for electricity.

For the pipeline:

The Roanoke Rapids Daily Herald editorial board expressed support. “The Atlantic Coast Pipeline will bring jobs to the Roanoke Valley, will provide less expensive natural gas and will help to reduce our nation’s dependence on foreign

energy and on higher emission power sources. For all these reasons, and even a few more, we support the construction of the 600-mile pipeline running right through our part of northeastern North Carolina.”

Johnston County businessman Durwood Stevenson, a Democrat and former N.C. Board of Transportation member, speaking in radio and TV ads supporting the project: “The Atlantic Coast Pipeline is an opportunity of a lifetime to provide clean efficient energy for the future of Eastern North Carolina and I am asking Governor Cooper to join me in supporting the Atlantic Coast Pipeline.”

Lumberton Chamber of Commerce Chairman Al Locklear, in a guest column in The Robesonian: “The natural gas transported through the pipeline will be used to generate cleaner electricity for residents all across eastern North Carolina, and perhaps more important, to fuel new industrial development in our area.”

The EnergySure Coalition, a group of some 250 businesses, organizations and individuals that support the pipeline: “North Carolinians are ready to get to work. And the Atlantic Coast Pipeline is ready to go to work for North Carolina. If that sounds like a future you want to be a part of, show your support by asking Governor Roy Cooper to support the Atlantic Coast Pipeline. Just click below to send a letter to Governor Roy Cooper in support of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline,” states a prompt on the EnergySure website.

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